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ABSTRACT

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Teacher Development through Project-based Learning: The Hollywood Elementary Story

Kathleen W. Glaser

Abstract

Inspired by Lilian Katz's lectures and books, the staff of Hollywood Elementary School in southern Maryland embraced Katz's philosophy of developmentally appropriate programs, project learning, and multiage grouping. This paper describes Hollywood's journey as a school community to implement these strategies, discussing the multiage organization of the school, the project-based curriculum that takes advantage of the natural environment around the school, the role of the Arts, teachers' professional development and innovation, and the tangible and intangible results of implementing the changes.

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The story of Hollywood Elementary School in St. Mary's County, Maryland, is a story of teachers individually and together seeking to create a meaningful, child-oriented, effective learning environment. A schoolwide focus on teachers' implementing project learning as a meaningful way to engage learners began when Hollywood's primary team attended "The New Elementary School" 1993 conference in Orlando, Florida, where Lilian Katz was the featured speaker. Inspired by her lecture and books, the principal and teachers embraced Katz's philosophy of developmentally appropriate programs, project-based learning, and multiage grouping.

As a principal, I particularly recall Lilian Katz's influence on my own professional development and thinking, especially her insight that when a teacher presents a lesson aimed toward the average student in the class, the instruction is usually too easy for one-third of the students, too hard for another one-third of the class, and thus ineffective for the majority of the students. This realization enabled me to support teachers' innovations that tailored instruction to the unique needs and strengths of individual students. Katz's challenging observations that kindergartners in different regions of the United States were all studying snow in winter and making caterpillars out of egg cartons in the spring rather than being engaged in student activities and products that were directly linked or connected to investigating the real community surrounding their school also had an impact on our thinking and interest in the Project Approach.

Multiage Groupings

Supported by Lilian Katz's research on multiage grouping, Hollywood incorporated the multiage concept into our new building design. The new school consisted of six "houses." Each house included a cluster of three or four self-contained classrooms surrounding a common area. In 1993 when the new building opened, each house consisted of several grade levels (i.e., K to grade 2, or grade 3 to grade 5) to make the house multiage and facilitate students learning from other students. The building was awarded a National School Boards Association Special Award because their jury was "impressed with the overall design which complements multiage grouping, learning, and activity centers, with teaming."

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In August 1993 before the building was completely ready for students, a workshop on the Project Approach was conducted by Sylvia Chard for Hollywood's newly formed teaching staff. During that first year, teachers studied project-based learning using Chard's (1992) guide and videos. A group of primary teachers also attended a Staff Development for Educators (SDE) workshop on multiage classrooms. With a growing confidence based on their knowledge of integrated curriculum utilizing project work and multiage strategies, the primary team decided to create multiage primary classes (grades 1/2) in the fall of 1994. Parent information sessions were held to communicate the rationale and advantages of multiage classrooms while also allowing parents a choice to have their child placed in a same-age class if they preferred.

Developmentally appropriate practices recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) were emphasized and consistently used as a reference for both the same-age and multiage programs. Experienced teachers coached beginning teachers, and the teaching teams planned curriculum units and topic and project work together. Spaces within the houses, especially classrooms with moveable walls between them, were assigned to teaching teams who volunteered to work collaboratively. The teachers' response to multiage classrooms was enthusiastic and positive. One classroom teacher with nine years of experience was convinced that she would never want to teach a same-age class of first-graders again because she saw so many benefits for students in multiage settings. She engaged her students in flexible groups with peers of different ages, interests, and abilities, thus maximizing their opportunities to learn from each other and to have their individual learning needs met.

During the past five years, the Hollywood staff have offered a variety of placement options for students including multiage classes (grades K/1, 1/2, 1/2/3, 2/3, 3/4, 3/4/5, 4/5) as well as looping arrangements where teachers continued with the same students for two consecutive years (grades K to 1, 2 to 3, and 4 to 5). Transition of fragile learners between grades and inclusion of special needs students in regular classrooms have been facilitated when a class such as a multiage 1/2 class has partnered with a 3/4 class. These students have especially benefited from working with a team of teachers who know their students (strengths and needs) over an extended period of time. The multiyear experience with the same teacher was also evaluated by parents and teachers, who found the grouping to be particularly beneficial to young learners.

The innovations of multiage classes and project-based learning with a high degree of teacher collaboration created a school climate of support for teacher risk taking and creativity while keeping the focus on each child's success and progress.

Curriculum Connections to Life

Each "house" within our school is named in a different language (e.g., Maison Deux/House Two, Dom Pyacht/House Five) to stimulate student interest in geography, diversity, and world cultures. The combination of the school's new building design and Katz's focus on learner engagement through meaningful exploration of real-world experiences provided the impetus for Hollywood teachers to find curriculum connections to world languages and geography. In December 1993, teachers responded to an invitation from the Moscow Ballet to have Dom Pyacht, our Russian House, students sing and participate in the ballet's performance of "The Nutcracker" in Baltimore. During that performance, 90 Hollywood students participated in the chorus and also experienced firsthand the backstage world of ballet. Students' comments reflected learning connections and possibilities for meaningful project work:

> The dancers were mostly all Russian. It was especially fun to hear them talk to each other in Russian—the words were complicated and neat.
>
> It was great to see the sets change between scenes, you could see people hiding behind other people.
>
> I was very interested in how simply they changed the scenery using a pulley.
>
> The dancers who were women wore toe shoes. The back and middle are like normal ballet slippers but the front inside is wood! That's to help them stand on their toes. When they walked on their toes I thought it was easy until I tried it.

Such unique opportunities for students to explore real-world events became part of the Hollywood experience for teachers and students, as teachers learned to seek out and utilize community resources to inspire learning and student investigations.

In August 1994, the Maryland State Department of Education funded another Project Approach workshop for teachers at Hollywood with a focus on meaningful utilization of the natural outdoor environment as a context for fieldwork and project-based learning. Hollywood's location on the ecologically sensitive southern Maryland peninsula, dotted with creeks and marshes, and surrounded by rivers and the Chesapeake Bay, created incredible opportunities for children and adults to learn from nature. As a new school site where natural habitats had been affected by school construction, Hollywood's environmental team began investigating possible restoration projects with students. These classroom investigations combined with community resources led to site improvements such as planting native wild grasses in the storm water management pond to create a healthy wetlands habitat and converting an unused lawn to a meadow habitat/wildlife study area. A nationwide study of environment-based learning, *Closing the Achievement Gap,* published in 1998 described Hollywood's program results:

> Hollywood students have turned their 72-acre campus into a living lab—blazing a nature trail, creating a butterfly garden, planting a forest habitat for migratory birds, and transforming a drainage pond into a natural wetland. Each project capitalized on the children's innate attraction to the natural world while providing unique opportunities to combine traditional subject areas in a meaningful whole. (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998)

Teaching teams consistently evaluated activities to determine which ones were causing the kind of student engagement that is so essential to learning that lasts.

In the fall of 1998, third-graders went on a field trip to a marsh as part of their study of the Chesapeake Bay. Prior to the trip, students studied maps of the watershed, as well as a map of the peninsula where the marsh is located. At the marsh, the students used dip nets to find out what kinds of organisms live there. They collected small fish, blue crabs, and grass shrimp. While they released most of what they caught, they were so interested in the grass shrimp that they brought some of them back to school to observe under a microscope. Students designed an experiment in a classroom aquarium to test which habitat grass shrimp prefer—marsh grasses or open water. Other students wondered why grass shrimp prefer grassy areas of the marsh. Their research revealed that grasses provide both food and protection. Their experiments and drawings were published in *Dragonfly* magazine (March/April 1999 issue). Later that school year, their teachers participated in a "Bay Grasses in Classes" workshop, a project sponsored by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. In recent years, much of the submerged aquatic vegetation has been lost in the bay and connecting rivers, thereby disturbing the natural ecosystem. Through this project, students learned how to grow bay grasses in the school science lab. They began with seeds, and three months later planted the grasses in a tributary flowing into the Chesapeake Bay. Teacher Julie Tracy (winner of a Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching Science) emphasizes the importance of students' initiative in project work (Tracy & Glaser, 1999): "If you approach a project saying 'we're going to go out and plant a tree,' then it's the teacher's project. But if the students are engaged in real scientific inquiry, and they're the decision makers directing the project, then it's authentic, and they're engaged in meaningful learning."

Vital Role of the Arts

The Arts have also played a prominent role in Hollywood's evolving story. Again and again, we have found that implementation of project-based learning spawns creative student products. For example, six large tile murals in the school courtyard depict different Chesapeake Bay watershed habitats. To create these murals, six classes each researched a different habitat. Those who had studied marshes in the grass shrimp project made tiles that depicted a salt marsh habitat, while each of the other classes selected a habitat they had been studying. All students researched their chosen habitat and composed a written description that educates others about the plants and animals shown in the mural's scene, as

well as the importance of that habitat to the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem. The tile murals were made in the art class, where students brainstormed possible designs and then voted on the layout of their habitat scene. Beginning with an actual-size drawing of the entire habitat scene, they made each of the clay tiles to depict a section of the scene.

The results of this mural project as well as numerous other student products have evolved from detailed observational drawings to beautiful watercolors or prints of the plants and animals being studied. Music and drama programs featuring student learning about a topic are another way that student achievements have been shared and celebrated. An active schoolwide arts team regularly seeks funding and staff development opportunities for teachers to incorporate the arts as well as to bring artists, poets, dancers, musicians, and other performing arts resources into the classroom.

Figure 1. Chesapeake Bay watershed mural, a product of student investigation of the local marsh habitat.

In 1997, a group of Hollywood teachers interested in making geography concepts come alive for students sought administrative support for creating an international fair during which students and teachers could feature the geography, arts, and culture of countries corresponding with the world languages used to name each of the "houses" in the school. Results of this schoolwide exploration and celebration of world cultures were very well received by students and the community. Writers for the student newspaper *The Hollywood Inner Chimes* reported their impressions of the 1999 International Day:

> I thought it was so interesting that the French flag has the same colors as the American flag.
>
> As soon as I walked in the China House, my passport was stamped with a picture of a dragon. Students performed a traditional Chinese bell dance, shaking long sticks with bells. Then everyone got a chance to do Chinese paper cutting.
>
> I learned some Swahili, the language of East Africa. The class talked about the people in East Africa and their way of life…some people live in huts made of grass, twigs, and other sticks. I can see why they would use these materials since they are the natural resources around them.

Because student projects in preparation for International Day experiences have been so successful, this event has become a Hollywood tradition.

Professional Development and Teacher Innovation

Hollywood's success confirms the research of Fallan and Joyce who "found that efforts at innovation must unfold in an environment of support characterized by trust, continuity, shared problem solving, and experimentation" (Maryland Commission on the Early Learning Years, 1992, p. 74). Lieberman and Hoody (1998), describing Hollywood's integrated learning projects, point to the importance of the principal's support and the teamwork among teachers. "In some instances, teachers paired up based on their differing preferences: a nature lover, unfazed by bugs and dirt, and a bookworm, more comfortable juggling papers and pencils." Students see their teachers model lifelong learning. Mary Roderick, an experienced

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fifth-grade teacher, is quoted in this nationwide study report stating: "Because I'm learning too, my attitude is contagious and helpful for my students."

Although it's been quite a challenge to seek and secure funding for teacher workshops, Hollywood has placed a high value on professional growth and adult learning opportunities; teachers have requested and are encouraged to attend a variety of workshops and professional conferences. As well as learning from each other and professional workshops, teachers have also collaborated with community experts—naturalists, legislators, artists, and soil conservationists.

Another project, begun in 1999 and funded by a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest grant, focused on local history and gathering stories of the past. Teachers and students utilized interviewing skills to learn from older citizens, during a time of transition and rapid growth in St. Mary's County. In this "Sharing our Stories" project, students and teachers concentrated on primary sources to research local history.

As Hollywood has maintained a clear focus on individual student achievement, our evolving mission emphasizes accessing and utilizing a variety of resources, small grants, and volunteers to create an optimal learning environment for every child. Innovation has become a key to success and part of the fabric of Hollywood. Student teachers and new teachers become immersed in instructional implementation that reflects current best practices. Frequent feedback from student teachers and their supervisors indicates their delight to be working in classrooms where they experience firsthand up-to-date educational theory being actualized. Teachers seek job openings at Hollywood to be in a climate of growth. Hollywood's spirit of being a community of learners and leaders inspires and challenges and also attracts new teachers. Different teaching strengths are welcomed, valued, and blended to nurture the variety of student needs and to support a diversity of teaching styles.

Growth and innovation require taking some risks. Hollywood's journey as a professional learning community reflects that willingness to take risks, to learn from mistakes as well as from success, and to utilize reflection and self-renewal as key strategies for professional growth. Teachers are encouraged "to run with their best ideas…[to customize curriculum to students' varying interests and needs]…the combined creativity of Hollywood's talented staff has transformed a little school in rural Maryland into a thriving national model of integrated, environment-based education" (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998).

Results: Tangible and Intangible

The Maryland statewide assessment program measures students' basic skills and their application of those skills in integrated curriculum tasks. Since 1995, Hollywood students have scored significantly higher than state averages in these Maryland assessments as well as in nationally normed achievement tests. Other tangible indicators of success include the number of grants awarded for teacher and student projects, special recognition of school/student achievements, project artifacts created by students, and publications about Hollywood's program such as "Classroom Earth" in the June 1999 issue of *Natural History Magazine*.

Intangible results include both process and product, a spirit of innovation and creativity that fosters adult learning and engaged student learning within a supportive community of learners and leaders. The momentum of the "living curriculum" at Hollywood flows from the willingness and imagination of teachers initiating exciting, authentic projects. In the school lobby and hallways, students' artwork, displays, and murals tell the story of students immersed in projects that are connected to the real world around them. In this "marketplace of learning" atmosphere, visitors frequently comment about the overall school climate as stimulating, purposeful, and creative—a place where diverse strengths, needs, interests, and cultures contribute to the meaningful growth of adults and children.

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